

Reflections, Impressions & Experiences

Pre-kindy purposes, benefits and strengths: Reflections during maternity leave

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The past two decades have seen the emergence of a unique and very popular class for children in Adventist Schools Australia (ASA) schools: the pre-kindy class. One class that parents appreciate and schools are anxious to embrace.

A contextualising background

Pre-Kindy classes are prior to school classes, usually made up of 3-5yr olds, who vary in their attendance patterns, between 2-5 days per week. Many city schools operate their pre-kindy classes 5 days a week, while those in the country typically operate 2-3 days per week. The ASA system currently operates 20 such pre-kindy classes. These classes have proven to be a valuable feeder to school enrolments, introducing parents to the ASA school system and encouraging them to consider this system as their primary school system of choice. What appears to have been the motivating factors behind school administrators decisions to operate pre-kindy classes, are both school readiness and prospective school enrolments. Currently 1:5 children in Australia have been identified as not socially, emotionally or academically ready for school (AAP, 2016). Boys appear to be more at risk than girls and indigenous children are 2.5 times more likely to be vulnerable to school failure, (AAP, 2016). ASA Pre-Kindy programs operate in this climate.

This paper seeks to explore the purpose, benefits and strengths of such programs by focusing on one teacher's reflections on her experience teaching in a highly multi-cultural, city ASA primary school's pre-kindy.

Claimed purposes for pre-kindy classes

Each year, state government education departments provide parents with information on how to prepare their child for school. These fact sheets and articles

include information and checklists about what has become labelled as school-readiness. The notion of school-readiness has been given considerable attention in the community as well as within educational realms, pre-kindergarten programs have become part of the strategy for helping students to develop school readiness skills in preparation for primary school (Rosier & McDonald, 2011; Hatcher, Nuner & Paulsel, 2012). They intentionally prepare children for the academic demands of primary school.

Transition to school programs are common across all sectors of early childhood education and care, however, not all agree about what competencies, knowledge and skills constitute school readiness. Education and care services governed by and responsible to the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA, n.d.) National Quality Standards appear to have a broader focus to their notion of school readiness and are motivated by education and care goals that focus on socio-cultural notions of the child developing knowledge, skills and dispositions for learning, along with a sense of identity, well-being & communication, with-in a caring community. What appears to be common across all prior to school early education and care programs is the opportunities they provide children to extend their learning, build relationships, and work collaboratively together (Dockett, & Perry, 2014). Transition to school programs are highly valued because research has found that children who participate in quality early education and care programs, (like pre-kindergarten), prior to starting school, experience benefits throughout and beyond their schooling years (Australian Government, 2012,).

Claimed benefits of pre-kindy classes

The benefits and strengths of pre-kindy programs appear to lie in their ability to connect children, families and professionals through conversations and relationships into a community that supports children's learning and development. This

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community scaffolds smooth transitions between the prior to school education and care environment and the school educational environment. Children who engage in these programs feel a sense of belonging to the school community before they begin school. This sense of belonging enables them to feel safe, secure and confident as they begin their kindergarten year. Parents also feel this same sense of belonging because of the relationships they have established with the school during the child's pre-kindergarten years.

Personal reflections on strengths and benefits

The following reflections highlight what I perceive to be the benefits and strengths of my pre-kindergarten program. A program that had as its ultimate goal enabling the children in my care to transition smoothly to 'big school' and to experience successful learning and development in their kindergarten year.

A) Physical environment

When parents enrol their child into a Pre-Kindy class with the intention that they will carry on through the primary years at the same school, they are providing their child with a place of continuity and familiarity. In Prep-Kindy, after students have had the opportunity to settle into their new room and routine, they have the new scope to attend assembly, chapel and the library, which are all located within the school grounds. Being familiar with the school environment will ensure that when the child returns to the school the following year, they feel comfortable with the physical surroundings (e.g. classrooms, playground, lunch spaces, tuckshop), hence there will be one less adjustment they need to make as they settle into kindergarten.

B) Familiar faces

Throughout the year, Pre-Kindy students have the opportunity to become acquainted with the other teaching staff of the school. These interactions occur during assemblies, chapels, lunch and play time. When Pre-Kindy students interact with other teaching staff on a regular basis, trust is built and relationships are formed. These relationships will prove vital as they move through the primary years at the school. Familiar faces and warm relationships ensure that student transitions are non-threatening. It will be the familiar face of their old Pre-Kindy teacher (waving to them over the fence) and the other staff that will ease the child's anxiety and build up their confidence as they settle into 'big school'. It is also necessary to note that starting kindergarten is not only a big transition for each child but for each parent. It will be the reassuring smiles of the well-

known teaching staff that calms the nervousness of a somewhat emotional parent, on their child's first day of kindergarten.

C) Integrated and intentional program based on the Key Learning Areas of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) curriculum

All ASA pre-kindergarten programs have developed integrated and guided programs that are strongly based on the KLA's of Early Stage One (i.e. the first year of formal school). Highly integrated programs have been developed with the intention of exposing students to the Early Stage One content in a fun, meaningful and relevant way. Each week students learn about the letter of the week. For that whole week, art activities, show and tell sessions, cooking, writing and reading lessons are based on the focus letter. When content is presented in a variety of modes, students are able to make connections within and across the key learning areas, as well as connections to their own personal experiences. The nature of integrated programs also provides students with the time they need to accommodate and assimilate the information covered. Pre-Kindy programs that focus on integration allow students to be exposed to the kindergarten curriculum through

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Figure 1. Learning about books

fun and diverse learning experiences.

Pre-kindergarten programs support & guide children's literacy development through exposure to experiences in phonemic awareness, comprehension, story writing, and listening, as well as the viewing & critiquing of multimodal texts. An aspect of my literacy program that is particularly relevant for English as an additional language learners, is an intentional focus around reading comprehension—using strategies such as visualizing the picture, making connections to past experiences, vocab recognition and phonemic awareness. Both

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the principal of the school and the children's parents expressed their desire for children to be exposed to early reading so that they would have a *good grasp* of reading before they began school. It became apparent that the Asian parents saw introducing their child to *academics* as a major purpose of the pre-kindergarten curriculum. They were especially happy when their children came home actually starting to read words, identify letters and sounds, and began to blend sounds to make words. The principal and I felt that a literacy program of this nature would support children towards a positive start to the school literacy program.

Children in the pre-kindergarten program were also exposed to opportunities to develop mathematical thinking, understanding & skills, through engagement with the early stage 1 mathematics curriculum. Their physical and gross motor and fine motor development was supported through their involvement in a PDHE curriculum, with manipulative experiences and gross motor play experiences.

D) Play

Most pre-kindergarten programs schedule some time each day, outside of recess and lunch breaks, for the children to engage in play-based experiences. Often this occurs after the more formal KLA content has been covered, as a reward for sustained engagement with the intentional program. In some pre-kindergarten programs play is intentionally embedded within the KLA content because the teachers in these programs understand that play is an essential characteristic of young children's learning and development (Hirsch-Pasek, Golinkoff, Birk & Singer, 2009). Play is children's work. It "provides a supportive environment where children can ask questions, solve problems and engage in critical thinking." Additionally it provides children with pressure free "opportunities to learn as they discover, create, improvise and imagine" (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 15). There are strong links between children's engagement in play-based learning experiences and children's capacity to remember, self-regulate, develop and practice oral language, as well as developing social skills. "Rather than detracting from academic learning, play appears to support the abilities that ... promote school success" (Coppie & Bredekamp 2009, p. 14 - 15).

I used play in my program to help foster relationships among the students, allow space for them to develop creativity and build linguistic skills. I was always surprised how they could turn a simple piece of outdoor climbing equipment, into a cubby house where all the girls would gather, seeking

refuge from those chasing them. They were able to teach me how to look at something from more than one angle. I will always remember seeing how the pretend play kitchen sink quickly became the rinsing sink for a very productive hairdresser salon.

E) Routines

The concept of routines includes whole group, small group instruction and learning centres as well as the flow of the timetable through arrival, clean up, hand washing, meals and transitions, to departure. Pre-Kindergarten classrooms offer young children opportunities to experience all of these routines. Routines are important because they support children's development of executive function by helping them feel secure, remember and predict happenings, practice skills, as well as plan and organise the flow of their day (Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

Routine cards are displayed in the classroom and are used to explain the daily schedule. Routine cards help students to understand the school 'system' (which is often different to that of other early learning institutions) and become familiar with subject names and other school activities like assembly and chapel. Since time is a somewhat abstract concept for preschool children, the visual routine board allows students to access information, at their level, about what is happening next. This in turn, helps students to become confident and happy learners. By the time students begin kindergarten they will already be accustomed to 'how things run' in the classroom and therefore, instead of trying to work out how the 'system' works, they will be ready and equipped to engage in the learning.



Figure 2. Learning about routines

F) Autonomy & self- help skills

While every day is a busy day in the pre-kindergarten room, considerable time is invested in teaching students the skills they need to become autonomous within a classroom context. Students learn: how to wash their

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hands correctly, to open lunch boxes and wrappers, what food to eat at which break-time, how to take care of, un-pack and pack-up their belongings. The transition to 'big school' can be made easier if students are able to carry out these basic tasks from day one of kindergarten, with minimal teacher assistance. This sense of competence in managing one's self will certainly aid in forming a positive attitude about starting school.

The approach taken to behaviour guidance was to support children in developing executive function, a function that is pivotal to their success in school environments. Executive function is the ability of a child to manage their attention, emotions, remember and think about information and control their behaviour, in order to reach goals. It involves the child's ability to integrate their social, emotional and intellectual capacities, (Galinsky, 2010, p. 6; Whittington, 2012). I chose to use the 123 Magic approach to behaviour guidance (Phelan, n.d.) that relies on giving children warnings and allowing them to make choices. Children are helped to label and describe their feelings, picture the day, categorise and sort, and with one and two step instructions to scaffolded them, to plan their activities.

G) Building relationships and social skills

Pre-Kindy programs support children in building relationships outside the family circle by supporting children's emergent social intelligence, through practice & reflection. They help children to understand and assess the feelings of others, control expressions of anger, (Kerns, 2010), negotiate and resolve conflicts, work co-operatively with others and develop the skills needed for entering and being a part of group situations (Schiller, 2009).

Students in pre-kindy programs have the opportunity to relate to and become friends with different students. This arrangement encourages students to establish multiple friendships rather than with only one or two specific children. This provides opportunities to implement and practise essential social skills, thus expanding and developing their repertoire of intrapersonal competencies. When students progress to attend kindergarten at the same school, the friendships they have formed in pre-kindy play a vital role in ensuring that they feel comfortable among their peers.

H) Parent perceptions of my pre-kindy program

The parents and grandparents of the children in my class were very interested in their child's progress. I'd talk to them every day about their child's day, celebrating with them the child's successes each day. I learnt the parent's names and wanted them to

feel welcome in my classroom. I chatted with them to discover what was happening in their families. I tried to listen to them and to get things done for them, (in response to their requests). I was very conscious of sharing this child with them. I wanted them to know I cared about their family and their child and wanted to help their child reach their full potential.

A pre-kindy report with a section for each KLA and a section for social development was created. The parents were very happy with this. They said, "Now I know exactly what my child can do." Some parents were very concerned and embarrassed when their child couldn't do something, so I had to explain that they just need time to develop this skill. The report allowed parents to support their child's learning by addressing, through their everyday activities at home, any areas they were struggling in (e.g. counting pegs while hanging out the washing). I also explained that the role of pre-kindy was to expose the child to the content so that it was familiar when it was taught in Early Stage 1. I also collated a portfolio of work for each child with samples of their work and pictures of their day. Parent really liked this, too. These reports had the potential to help the kindy teacher, enabling a review of who was coming into class and their documented skills. When she interviewed parents, before the child went to school, she had useful information about the background of the potential student. This was a real advantage that derived from this pre-kindy program.

I) Teacher's Aide

I was blessed to have a teacher's aide present in the classroom with me at all times during the pre-kindy day. I would like to acknowledge Shiwani's role as pivotal in the success of the program.

I soon encouraged her to lead out in lessons with the whole class while I was dealing with other issues (instead of her just assisting with things like clean up, prepping or packing up activities). I wanted the children to see that she was another teacher in the room, just like me. Not just an 'assistant'. We were able to work like clock-work. Sometimes she led and I supported, but mostly she supported and I led. I believe the children could see the kind of relationship we had—as team members who were 'on the same page'. This certainly minimised the occurrence of challenging behaviour. It also meant that when a casual replacement teacher came, Shiwani could 'hold the fort' in a stronger supporting role. She was confident enough to lead out or to offer abundant support. She knew my programs, she'd taught from them herself, so there were never any 'unproductive' or 'busy-work' days. The kids knew this! Our programs carried on each day of the school year. This, I believe, was a comfort for parents too.

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Consistency for the children is a key to their well-being and continuity of learning.

J) Biblical world view

Pre-kindy programs are instrumental in introducing children and their families to a Biblical worldview and its values through a community of faith and learning (ASA, 2015). Many children who attended our pre-kindy came from non-Christian backgrounds. During their time in pre-kindy they were introduced to God, Jesus and a Christian world view through Bible stories, songs, discussions and crafts. Families expressed their appreciation for the values and care their children were exposed to. A few parents came to tell me how their child had been 'sharing Jesus' at home by showing their family how to pray at meal times and teaching them Bible songs. At the end of the school year they'd receive a Bible based gift that had been used in our class during their time in pre-kindy. These gifts were well received by the students and their families despite the fact that most of them did not share the same religious background. This is potentially attributed to the close relationships formed throughout the year, and because of this we were able to minister to each family without having to face the usual barriers that often can come with sharing the Gospel within a community. Pre-kindy was 'my' little mission field. Many of these children went on to attend local primary schools. The pre-kindy program was instrumental in raising the local community's awareness of the Christian worldview and value system.

In summary

The reflections shared above, have sought to highlight the purpose and potential benefits and strengths of ASA pre-kindy programs. There is much to celebrate about these current programs:

- Many 4 yr olds have been supported to be ready for school
- Seamless transitions between pre-kindy and school have occurred
- School enrolments have flourished
- Parents have been very happy with the program and have formed positive relationships with school staff
- Children with languages other than English have been provided opportunities to acquire English proficiency before they begin formal schooling

While it is true that many practices can be claimed as strengths of these programs, it is also pertinent to note that a number of the claimed strengths of pre-kindy programs are equally applicable to quality long day care and preschool

education programs occurring outside of the immediate school environment. These types of services typically operate an intentional transition to school program, in the year prior to school, that achieves many similar outcomes to those claimed by ASA pre-kindies, however, because of their physical location in school grounds, ASA pre-kindies are uniquely positioned in their ability to familiarise children with the school program, routines and personnel, resulting in unique opportunities for continuity of education. The benefits and strengths of ASA pre-kindies highlighted in this article can contribute significantly to a child's successful transition to school.

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